Maricopa County
Animal Care & Control

THE GOLDEN YEARS

Our companion animals rocket through infancy in six short months, struggle though an adolescence that seems like forever but it's actually only 12 to 18 months, and then reach that plateau known as adulthood - ages 2 to 8. Before we know it, Mojo and Belle have reached their Golden Years.

As with every stage of life, cats and dogs in their golden years demand some special considerations. For example, not unlike their human caretakers, geriatric dogs and cats slow down - in some cases way down. Older animals tend to sleep more soundly and for longer periods. It is more difficult to roust them out of bed in the morning, and they may become a bit more snappish if startled out of a slumber. A soft, orthopedic foam bed with a machine-washable pile cover (essential for cleaning up old-age accidents) becomes indispensable for arthritic bones that seek warmth and comfort.

Because of changes in metabolism, an older animal is unable to regulate his body heat the way he used to. A thinning coat doesn't help matters either. Older pets feel colder in the winter and hotter in the summer that they did in their middle years, so winter sweaters may be advisable even for breeds that never needed them before. Summer walks may need to be shorter or taken at the coolest time of the day.

Four of the five senses diminish with age, leaving only the sense of touch as acute as it was in more youthful days. Hearing loss is noted by owners who feel that their companion has tuned them out. Such a loss may help to explain why older animals seem to sleep more soundly or react more aggressively to being woken up.

Loss of the sense of smell can be quite dismaying for owners who rely on their working dogs' noses to perform tasks such as drug detection, search and rescue or tracking. (Although I do know a few beagle and basset hound owners who are excitedly looking forward to the day when their dogs will be less scent-oriented on their strolls outdoors.)

A diminished sense of smell can be more serious for felines than for dogs, because cats rely on the aroma of food for their appetite. Some geriatric cats have been know to waste away as their sense of smell waned. You can avoid such an outcome by purchasing a more aromatic food or heating up the regular entree, thus releasing a stronger odor.

Cloudy lenses, cataracts and eye diseases may dim the sense of sight in your older pet. Most companion animals compensate extremely well for loss of vision and move about abode with a sense of ease. Sometimes an owner does not realize

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that a pet has gone blind until the furniture is moved and an animal loses it's way in unfamiliar terrain. A reluctance to leave the house by a dog that once cherished his walks may have its roots in diminishing vision. A trip to the veterinary ophthalmologist may be in order.

Like their human counterparts, many older animals gain too much weight. Obesity is due to reduced activity, overfeeding, and a lower metabolic rate. The additional weight stresses the heart and can exacerbate arthritis, resulting in an animal that is even less likely to exercise.

How do you help a fat cat or plump pooch? Diet and exercise. Foods that can be found at both grocery stores and specialty shops are formulated with the senior companion in mind. Prescription diets are available for cats and dogs with heart, liver and kidney problems. Moderate play can keep muscles toned, blood circulating, and, perhaps most important of all, the digestive system moving. In other words, play can prevent constipation - a very serious problem, particularly in older cats.

Mojo and Belle's senior years area time that demands owner alertness. Weigh your companion every three months. Bring weight swings in either direction to your veterinarian's attention, for they could indicate a serious medical problem such as diabetes. Frequent grooming sessions will also keep you in touch with any physical changes. Keep your eyes and nose open for tumors, lesions, lumps, discolorations or bad breath, and report any such changes to your veterinarian. Early treatment can prolong your companion's life considerably.

Behaviorally, a cat or dog may become set in his ways and resist change. Slow introductions to new environments and activities are in order. Don't fall for the old saying. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks"! Of course you can; it just takes a little longer. *Old Dogs, Old Friends*, a new book by Chris Walkowicz and Dr. Bonnie Wilcox, is filled with stories of dozens of canines who took up new activities in their golden years.

For those who think that bringing in a new, younger companion into the household will put some life into their old boy or girl, think again! If Mojo or Belle has been the "only child" a new addition can add more stress than he or she can bear and cause the animal to go off it's feed, become snappish and irritable , or go into hiding. It could also lower it's resistance to disease.

However, if your dog or cat has always been a part of a mulit-animal menagerie and is in relatively good health, a new household member may fit with little fuss.

Although geriatric cats and dogs are seldom the ideal new companion for a young child, they do quite well presiding over a full-time working household or sharing retirement with a senior citizen. If you are interested in providing a few quality years for a feline or canine senior that has fallen on hard times, go to Animal Care and Control and make your wishes known to the adoption counselors. A geriatric companion is waiting to wash your face and warm your heart - not to mention your feet. Ah, the "tails" they can tell!